

POKÉMON
REBIRTH
ULTIMATUM
Endgame Edition



EPISODE TWENTY FOUR
Ice Shard

Having been rescued from what would have undoubtedly been a certain end, Jenna and Kevin had the benefit of obscurity on their side. Regardless, the duo couldn't use their true names for the time being, as it would alert Team Rocket to the fact that their prisoners had somehow survived. As Caley's travelling companions had done, so too did Jenna and Kevin adopt new identities. Their intention was to travel west, back towards Johto, in order to see if the activities of the organization that had once kept them prisoner had spread to other regions.

The duo had barely recovered from their prior experiences when a vicious storm struck - undoubtedly an after effect of what had occurred an hour before. They hurriedly took shelter within a nearby cave and kept together in order to preserve some kind of warmth. It was a difficult thing to do, considering both ex-operatives were still soaked through from being cast into the ocean. Kevin wasn't one to let morale flag, and took to recounting some of the funnier moments of their time spent as cameraman and reporter. It wasn't long before Jenna's crushed visage had brightened and she was chuckling and reminiscing alongside her companion. At least until a frightened cry was heard from outside the cave entrance. Jenna had sprung to her feet and ran to the entrance to see a large, purple, bulbous form clinging helplessly to a branch with one fin-like appendage as the wind threatened to pull it away into the sky. It wasn't until she and Kevin had managed to pull the form indoors that the duo discovered it was, in fact a pokémon. Remarkably, it was one of Jenna's own pokémon.

"Flair!" Jenna cried out happily, throwing her arms around the drifblim and generating a curious rubbery squeak. "How did you find us?" She pulled back and gave her pokémon a beaming smile. "That's a silly question, isn't it? You used your smarts, as you always do! Are Ivy and Ikinis okay?"

"Bliiih~!" Flair replied, offering her two front fins towards Jenna. She reached out her hands and the drifblim dropped a Pokéball into each of them.

"Thanks for taking care of them, Flair," Jenna smiled, before looking at the Pokéballs. "Well, no need for you guys to stay cooped up in there any more. Out you come!"

From the light of the two Pokéballs, a blaziken and a raichu appeared. The latter was wearing a puzzled expression, while the former looked quite expectant.

"Guess what, guys!" Jenna exclaimed. "We made it! We got out of Team Rocket!" This generated a burst of triumphant cries from all three pokémon. Moments after his utterance of celebration, it was Ikinis' turn to look puzzled.

"Blayy kehn?" he inquired.

"Ry-chuh!" Ivy agreed, in a tone that demanded a swift explanation.

"By your expressions, I guess you're wondering how that was possible," Jenna chuckled. "Well this is going to take a little time to explain, but..."

And the young woman proceeded to retell the events surrounding their escape. Flair, Ikinis and Ivy listened as their human companion spoke of the elaborate plan to free Team Rocket's pokémon experiments and shut down their newly constructed obelisk that had gone somewhat awry, followed by her and Kevin's imprisonment and brush with death. By the time she had reached the end of her tale, Flair looked quite horrified, while Ikinis clasped his face in disbelief and Ivy sparked angrily.

"Ry ry-chuh?" she spluttered, letting out a jolt of electricity which seared the nearby dirt. "Ry! Ry-chuh ry ry-chuh?" This statement was punctuated by an arm wave towards the empty Pokéballs lying near Jenna, followed by a swift arc of both arms, in an attempt to mimic a burst of energy, and a motion towards the pokémon's own chest. Flair looked deeply bereft at this point, and hovered a little closer to the frustrated raichu.

"Blih-blihhh drih..." the drifblim elaborated. "Drif-blih blih blihhh."

"RY?" Ivy almost erupted, causing Flair to edge backwards to the best of her ability. The electric pokémon swung round on Jenna at this point. "Ry-chuh ry ry?"

"I'm sorry, Ivy..." Jenna scratched the back of her head nervously. She knew the Raichu had a snappy temper, but never had the temper been aimed towards her before. "I can't understand what you're trying to tell me."

Grumbling under her breath, the Raichu took her Pokéball from Jenna's side, before jabbing it at one of Flair's ribbon-like appendages.

"Oh...are you annoyed that I had you sent away?" Jenna asked. Ivy folded her arms and nodded. "Look, it wasn't that I don't think you guys are strong. Team Rocket had made all kinds of unnaturally-powerful things in their labs. That, and I didn't want any of you getting used in their twisted experiments."

"Blay blay zih ken?" Ikinis insisted, pointing at Jenna with a grey claw.

"What, me?" Jenna blinked. "Yeah...there always *was* the chance that I might've been caught up in the whole thing too." She paused, examining the blaziken's disapproving yet sad face, and Ivy's sullen features nearby. "Are you mad because I didn't let you stand together with me?"

"Ry," Ivy replied firmly, without shifting pose. Ikinis said nothing, but his expression dictated that he hadn't felt comfortable that Jenna had gone through such trials without him.

"Okay, so maybe I was wrong to do that," Jenna said regretfully. "I was thinking about protecting you so much, that I didn't think of how

you might have wanted to do the same for me. I'm sorry I didn't consider that. But let's start fresh - let's stand together from now on. Deal?"

All three pokémon brightened considerably, and cheered a thorough affirmative before proceeding to engulf Jenna in a vigorous embrace. Kevin stood nearby and observed this with contentedness, and a slight hint of envy.

"Man, Jen..." he remarked, once the young woman had been released from the group hug. "You're so lucky to have such loyal pokémon friends."

"They're your friends too y'know, Kevin," Jenna reminded him perkily. Ikinis backed this statement up by approaching Kevin and giving him a hearty pat on the back, to which the man couldn't help but chuckle. "Now we've got that sorted out, we'd best be heading for Johto."

Once the storm had calmed, Jenna and Kevin set about crafting themselves new appearances. With no access to the colour-changing disguises that their friends had managed to obtain, the best they could do was a trim and two sachets of hair dye. After their hair and eyebrows had been recoloured, and their Team Rocket uniforms replaced for civilian clothing, Kevin and Jenna sought a means to travel to Johto. The fastest method of transport was by air, but mainline services were out of the question, as IDs were checked and re-checked. As such, Kevin and Jenna were forced to inquire of a more economized service - a small,

independently-run passenger carrier running trips from Tatto's south coast. It wasn't a bad deal - the plane was in good condition and the captain was amiable enough - but the choice disappointed Kevin greatly, as he had been hoping to watch the streaming programmes delivered on major flights. At least until the captain offered the use of his old portable television.

"Kevin..." Jenna tutted. "You haven't looked out of the window since we took off. You're missing some great views!"

"I'm not missing anything," Kevin smiled distantly, transfixed by the screen's flickering light.

"You can watch TV whenever you like, now we're out of that place," Jenna frowned. "When are you going to get the chance to see sights from a plane again?"

"On the trip back?" Kevin pointed out. Jenna sighed, and conceded defeat. At least she would be able to immerse herself in the beauty outside - something she had seen very little of after her active duty rights were taken away, back in Team Rocket. It was obvious she and Kevin clung to quite different notions of enjoyment. She was a traveller at heart, ready to explore all the treasures the world had to offer, while he was perfectly happy to explore the myriad of broadcasts generated by Oci's television networks.

Jenna glanced back from the window and studied the inside of the passenger cabin once again. It was quite homely in appearance, with

décor and fittings more like that of a motor caravan, and contained twenty seats - at least half of which were filled. The front cover of someone else's newspaper caught her eye. "Tatto Terrorists at Large" - it read in bold lettering, with the manipulated images of the other Team Rocket escapees set underneath. It invoked a number of feelings within Jenna - relief that her companions had managed to evade capture, frustration at the blatantly unjust portrayal of them by the media, worry over how events were going to pan out. Project Rebirth was undoubtedly alive and well, and they had to uncover just what this project entailed before it reached completion and was unleashed upon an unsuspecting populace.

The plane touched down on a privately-owned airfield just outside of Yorklyn. From there, Kevin and Jenna hitched a ride to Yorklyn itself, before taking some time to examine various news sources broadcasting in the city's coach station. Jenna knew from conversations with her mother, who was a reporter by profession, that the best way to judge potential locations for Team Rocket activity was to search for records of significantly odd happenings in the region. It turned out that one of the main headlines was detailing clusters of flying type pokémon that had plummeted out of the sky around Mount Quena, the highest rock formation in Johto. Medical professionals and scientists had been at the scene for the past few days, but neither of which had been able to determine the reason for the catatonic state of the pokémon that had fallen to earth. Nor had they succeeded in scaling the mountain. Nothing

had been said about the reasons for this inability to reach Mt. Quena's peak, but Kevin and Jenna had some pretty good ideas. This seemed like a strong first candidate in what they were looking for.

With that, the duo boarded a coach heading past Mt. Quena, and settled on a pair of seats near the back row, in order to peruse a current events magazine they hoped might contain more leads. Bar the mention of some unusual tremors across the area of Sinnoh's Mt. Coronet, the news within seemed typically subdued. Jenna was about to close the magazine and return to enjoying the outside scenery, when Kevin's hand reached across her and jabbed at something on the open pages.

"Hey, that kid looks familiar..." he murmured.

Jenna blinked and glanced at the page Kevin was pointing to. The face of a boy with unkempt dark hair stared back at her from a photograph set above a 'Missing Persons' advert. He was dressed in a dark red jacket with lighter coloured diamond shapes on each shoulder, and atop his head was placed a blue baseball cap with a Pokéball insignia. His expression was that of happiness and triumph, the cropped parts of the image seeming to dictate he had been at a Pokémon League tournament at the time the photograph was taken.

"Ash Ketchum'..." Jenna murmured to herself. "'16 years old. Last seen, Silver Town, Johto.'"

"Sure doesn't *look* 16..." Kevin remarked, before leaning forward a little in realisation. "Hey...didn't he show up during one of our reporting stints?"

"You've seen Ash?" a hopeful voice echoed to the left of them. The duo turned to see a young woman with long orange hair tied into a ponytail, sitting on one of the adjacent seats.

"Not recently," Jenna admitted. "Why?"

"He's...someone I know," the young woman replied, though her voice seemed to force its way over the mid-part of the sentence. "And he's been gone for months now."

"Gone?" Jenna looked visibly concerned. Part of her wondered if this had been a similar case to her own - an unsuspecting person roped into a dark criminal underworld through a back door - but decided to let the stranger divulge further. "What happened?"

"Something unexpected," the young woman sighed. "It began shortly after Ash returned from his journey round Sinnoh. He'd been about to take a trip out with his mother and Professor Oak one morning, when Team Rocket struck. Okay, so *that* wasn't all that unexpected - these guys went after Ash on a near-daily basis. What *was* unexpected, was the serious advantage they had this time around. Their robotic machine was nothing like the flimsy ones they'd used before - it practically wiped the floor with Ash's poor pokémon, and then stole most of them away. The Police have been on the lookout for them ever since."

Kevin and Jenna exchanged uncomfortable glances, but the young woman continued unawares.

"Late last year, our friend May completed her tour of Johto and reached 4th place in the Silver Conference finals," she explained. "I begged Ash to come with me to Johto for the after-tournament party. Figured that it might distract him a little from the terrible thing that had just happened. But Ash was distant...reluctant. Maybe it was wrong of me to have forced something like that on him after his loss."

"I'm sure you only meant well," Jenna insisted.

"Yes, but..." the young woman began to choke up. "Maybe I was the one that pushed him over the edge."

"Over the edge'?" Jenna echoed worriedly, waiting for the young woman to gather her thoughts and the strength to share them.

"We were barely at the party for half an hour, and Ash left," she replied. "May's little brother Max ran after him, and I promised May that I would go and find them both. In the forest outside of Silver Town, I caught up with Max - he'd been so shaken up he could barely speak. Max had told me how he'd seen Ash in a fit of anger, and when he'd tried to find out why, Ash had yelled at him to leave. I told Max to go back to the party and went to confront Ash myself. But I was not prepared for what I saw next..."

The young woman froze, her eyes glazing over. The images of the event were still fresh in her mind - cries of agony and distress, a once-

familiar voice now contorted with emotion into a sound she could barely tolerate. She had run into a scene of carnage - unconscious, battered bodies of pokémon, Ash's own remaining teammates, strewn across the forest floor. Pikachu was the only one left standing, albeit barely, his eyes filled with a confused sadness. It had been clear the pokémon had been searching for some measure of empathy or remorse in his human companion's face, but all such responses had left. Pistol, Ash's quilava, had attempted to move - if only to utter a fragmented protest in order to stop the madness. But he had been drowned out with Ash's vehement response.

"Do it!" he had yelled at Pikachu. "If he can't take another hit then he isn't *worthy* of training with me!"

The next thing Misty had felt was her hand making contact with the side of Ash's face. A chill had run down her arm as if it had been grabbed by a regice, causing her to back away in shock. At the same time, the encompassing darkness in Ash's eyes had vanished. For a split-second, his face had been overcome with an immeasurable horror. Then he had turned and ran deeper into the forest with Pikachu in anxious pursuit.

That had been the last she had seen of them both.

At that point, the young woman broke down in tears. Jenna hesitated, caught between putting an arm around the sobbing figure or staying put. She chose the former - despite her lack of familiarity for the

young woman, it was obvious she needed consolation. Indeed the figure made no attempt to break away from Jenna's comforting - instead burying her head in her hands to muffle the sounds of her despair.

"Ash had never been so cruel to his pokémon before," she sniffed. "He had always known their limits, and when to stop. But I worry that having some of his pokémon stolen from him has turned him desperate - forcing everyone to train too hard. I reacted to his behaviour without thinking and just made the situation worse..."

She rubbed at her eyes, trying to regain some control over her breathing.

"I'm sorry you had to see that. I guess I couldn't keep what happened to myself any longer. You're the first person I've spoke to about this - I've just been too shocked and scared to tell any of Ash's friends what he did. I feel messed up enough about it, even *with* knowing what Ash has been through - I don't want him to return to complete rejection."

"That's really thoughtful of you," Jenna smiled a little.

"It's the least I could do after how I lashed out at him," the figure insisted. "I know some of his behaviour was my fault, but Team Rocket has a *lot* to answer for Ash's suffering. I can't forgive them for this."

Kevin and Jenna detected a frigid aura from the young woman and cringed in unison. They felt a similar distaste for the organization, yet

despite their ties having been more or less severed, they couldn't help be unsettled by the young woman's passionate animosity.

"I couldn't sit around and do nothing, though," she looked stern. "I've been searching for Team Rocket in the hopes of getting Ash's pokémon back. Maybe then he'll stop acting so crazy and come home."

"Don't wish to sound rude or anything, miss," Kevin began awkwardly. "But you sure you know what you're up against?"

"My name's 'Misty'," the young woman replied with a frown. "And I'm fully aware of what Team Rocket can do. I know what *my* team is capable of, as well. I haven't trained to master the art of battling with water pokémon without learning a few things."

"Well that's...reassuring," Kevin grinned sheepishly. "So...uh...where you heading?"

"Mt. Quena," Misty replied. "Some pretty strange reports have been coming from around that area and I bet it's because Team Rocket are up to something there."

Her two listeners glanced at one another before concluding on a silent agreement. While they hadn't intended to rope anyone else into their business, if that person happened to be heading in the same direction anyway, they had little to lose from it.

"We're pretty sure you're right about that," Jenna said. "It's why we were going there too. Would you be interested in travelling together?"

"Well sure, I'm happy for the company," Misty relaxed somewhat. "Still, are you prepared for Mt. Quena's terrain? It's a pretty big rock to climb..."

"Yeah, we heard," Kevin grinned, a mischievous look in his eye. "Don't worry, we've got the help we need."

The majority of Police activity was occurring on the south side of Mt. Quena, so Kevin and Jenna took it upon themselves to travel round to the northern side. This they achieved by navigating the woodland alongside the riverbank that flowed through the mountain's rear perimeter. Much to Misty's discomfort, as the woodlands were known for having a particularly sizeable bug pokémon population. She calmed down a little once Jenna offered Ikinis' services as a bug repellent, and turned her thoughts to the meaning behind Team Rocket's presence atop the rock structure.

What could they honestly be doing up here this time? Misty wondered. It certainly couldn't have been anything related to Mewtwo, as the psychic pokémon had taken the liberty of wiping the memory of his existence from the minds of all Team Rocket operatives present on Mt. Quena, while he had been resident there. Once that question turned up no satisfying results, Misty's thoughts returned to the subject she had considered long and hard ever since her companion's disappearance.

"Ash got so used to winning," Misty said. "I guess he wasn't prepared for a loss that big. He does have a lot to live up to, after all."

"Oh?" Jenna glanced up, slightly caught off guard by this utterance out of the blue.

"His dad Liam was a Gym Leader at one point," Misty explained. "So I heard from my own dad. Ran an Earth-type Pokémon Gym in Viridian City, one of the most powerful in the Kanto circuit. No doubt Ash has wanted to make him proud - maybe he even thinks that would bring him back."

"'Bring him back'?"

"He's...never really been there," Misty sighed. "After Liam stopped running Viridian City Gym, he's been kept away from his home and family in some way or another. Most of his contact has been through phone calls and the very occasional visit. I feel bad for Ash, knowing about that - there was a period of time when I was 12 that my dad was forced to be away from me and my sisters, while my mom was very sick, and I missed him terribly. I can't imagine how it must feel for Ash to have had barely any contact with his father."

As Misty completed her recalling of past events, Jenna looked deeply thoughtful. It was understandable that Ash would become frustrated over his father's absence, and she was certainly curious as to what kind of job could possibly keep a husband away from his wife and son for so long. Despite this, she couldn't help but feel the extreme nature of Ash's reactions was unjustified. The fury had sounded intense, and his pokémon and human friends hardly deserved the brunt of it.

"Here we are," the water pokémon trainer pointed out. "The base of the mountain."

"Whoa..." Kevin trailed off as he gazed upward. "You weren't kidding when you said this was extreme. That's a near-vertical rock face!"

"Shouldn't be a problem though, right?" Misty smiled cheekily. "After all, you said you've got all the help you need." She plucked a Pokéball from her jacket and activated it, sending a harsh beam of white light onto the floor in front of her. The light shifted and grew into a form with a quadrupedal lower body and a humanoid upper body. As the light faded, it revealed a five foot high pokémon with a tough, lumpy pink skin covered in spiky protrusions - not unlike that of a piece of coral.

"A corsotaur," Jenna observed, notably impressed. "Solid choice."

"Corsotaur and I have been together for a while now," Misty agreed. "I trust her with my life."

"Kor-suh!" Corsotaur remarked proudly. Once Misty had observed the pokémon's back for a suitable position, she donned a pair of thick gloves and clambered aboard, grasping tightly at two of the strongest spikes jutting from Corsotaur's upper body. Then, without further instruction, the coral centaur pokémon leapt with surprising grace onto the side of the rock wall and began to ascend by use of its muscled arms.

"Your call," Kevin glanced at Jenna, who nodded. Flair was soon released into the open.

"Do you think you'll be able to carry us both up, Flair?" Jenna asked the drifblim.

"Blih bliihm~" came the reply. The pokémon seemed a little hesitant, but wasn't about to let uncertainty deter her from trying. Jenna allowed Flair to take her in two of its flipper appendages, and Kevin was wrapped into the opposite pair. Then, with an inhalation of breath, the drifblim rose steadily into the air, parallel to the north side of Mt. Quena.

As the three humans and their two pokémon companions gradually ascended, the peak of Mt. Quena began to draw into view. Thick, dark clouds of smoke were obscuring the topmost ridge, making it impossible to tell just how much higher the group had to climb.

"We won't be able to pass through that smoke without some kind of protection," Misty said sternly. "Though your drifblim should be okay, since it's a ghost type. Can you bring yourself in closer? Corsotaur will be able to put a Safeguard shield around us and keep the air breathable."

"I'd better bring out Ivy and Ikinis, too," Jenna remarked.

"At once?" Misty looked worried.

"We don't know what's up there," Jenna insisted. "I'm sure we need all the help we can get!" Besides..." she lowered her voice. "I promised them we'd overcome challenges together from now on."

Misty gazed at her companion for a moment, then a smile emerged on her face.

"I respect that," she said. "Let's go then."

No sooner had they reached the solid, flat ridge that bordered Mt. Quena, Jenna released Ikinis and Ivy from their Pokéballs. Both the raichu and blaziken were glad to see that their human friend had kept her word. Everyone covered their faces and quickly huddled around Corsotaur who then focused a faint greenish sphere of energy around them all, before too much of the thick, gaseous atmosphere were to penetrate their lungs. Then the group proceeded deeper into the unknown.

"Take it slow, everyone," Misty remarked. "We don't know where the edge of this ridge will show up."

"All this smoke must have somehow been generated by Team Rocket to make it impossible to see what they are up to around here," Jenna deduced.

"Yeah..." Kevin gave a nod. "But on the up side, it'll make it impossible for them to see us sneaking in, too."

"Oh, you'd like to think that, wouldn't you?" a smooth, slightly obscured voice was heard nearby. The group swung round in alarm to see a teal-haired man in his early thirties, dressed in a Rocket Elite rank uniform with a beret, and a gas mask covering his face. A golbat hovered nearby, staring down at the newcomers with judgemental distaste. "What have we here?" the man inquired in slightly disinterested tones.

"Unwelcome visitors. Still..." his eyes creased slightly at the corners behind his gas mask. "It was starting to get boring around here."

"We're not here for your entertainment," Misty growled.

"Well you're certainly not going to accomplish anything else," the man sneered. "There are thirty Elites patrolling the mountain perimeter alone. And that's not even counting the forces on the lower level." He gazed out seemingly at nothing. "Make sure they don't leave."

Before the group of humans and pokémon could work out just who the man had addressed, several globs of dark, sludgy substance flew out from the cloud around them and hit their feet - binding them to the ground. Another round of blobs slammed into Flair's back, creating a repulsive gooey tether that latched her to the earth and caused her to cry out in surprise.

"What is this stuff?" Kevin exclaimed with disgust, trying to move his legs with no success.

"Oh just a little something my allies cooked up for you," the man replied. "They can do many other things besides smoke veils."

"Smoke...veils?" Misty blinked, then it dawned on her. "There are pokémon inside that cloud!"

"Quite a lot actually, yes. You're a sharp one," the man said. His tone of voice made it difficult to tell whether he was being sarcastic or not. He picked up a communicator from his belt and held down the call button. "This is agent Proton, sector 8. I've just-" He wasn't able to finish

his sentence before a thin, whip like beam of energy lashed at the communicator, breaking it in two.

As the pieces of the device clattered to the ground, Proton glanced back in temporary alarm to see Ivy glowering at him angrily. His shocked expression quickly darkened.

"Apparently this overgrown battery needs to be taught a little respect," he remarked, giving the surrounding cloud an expectant look. "Gyro Ball."

Three weezings emerged from the denser area of cloud and barrelled into Ivy all at once. Ikinis attempted to swipe some of them away, only to be set upon by yet more weezings. The injury delivered to the attacking poison types only served to encourage more of them to bombard those they had recently trapped, and soon every member of the group was under assault. Proton smiled to himself at this act of chaos, before looking at the golbat fluttering next to him.

"Find Admin Tyson," he told it. "Bring him here. I'm sure he would love to be acquainted with our intruders."

From under the leathery bodies of the aggravated weezings, Misty saw the golbat fluttering away, its body growing vague amongst the tumbling smoky masses.

"We can't let it get away!" she spluttered.

"Ikinis, I need you to cut the gunk that's holding Flair," Jenna instructed. The blaziken swiped at the substance with its claws. No sooner

keep it that way...but maybe that was the wrong way to go about it. After all, the golbat had its sonar to easily navigate the weezings also. If Flair could just get the golbat to slow down for long enough to disable its sonar, she might have a chance.

Taking aim, Flair unleashed a sphere of ghost type energy at the escaping pokémon. It glanced its right wing, causing it to falter in flight. Encouraged, Flair shot another sphere - this one hit the golbat square in the back, generating an annoyed squawk. Distracted from Proton's original order by its own frustration, the golbat turned around and opened its gaping maw - ready to sink its fangs into the approaching drifblim whose growing outline its sonar was detecting clearly. Then without warning, everything became murky and hazed. The golbat reeled back in alarm and disorientation - Flair had managed to get close enough to disable her opponent's sonar and now all it had was its limited sight abilities to deal with.

But it came at a cost. The surrounding weezings had been alerted by the golbat's exclamations that something was amiss, and had come to investigate. Their method of investigation was to charge wildly at the perceived threat. Flair uttered a yelp and generated a substitute of herself, leaving both it and the bewildered golbat in the line of fire. A loud thud from the collision of several bodies ensued, and the golbat's unconscious form plummeted from the air and hit the dirt, to be seemingly lost amongst the smoky swirl. Assuming the threat neutralised, the weezings returned to their previous duties.

Carefully, Flair approached the fainted golbat and gathered it in her flippers, before engaging her senses to look for Jenna and her companions. They were relatively easy to spot, in a cluster of body Aura and electrical energy. With a smile, Flair quickly floated towards these signals. Upon arriving at the scene, Flair discovered the group surrounded by fallen weezing that had been taken down by Ivy, Ikinis and Corsotaur's attacks, as well as the slumped bodies of Proton and another Team Rocket Elite that had accompanied him back to the source of trouble after he was blasted away by Corsotaur's Hydro Pump.

"Thank goodness you made it back," Jenna sighed with relief, at seeing Flair. "Did you manage to stop that golbat?"

"Blihhm~" Flair replied, holding up the pokémon in her flippers. She then proceeded to place it gently atop the pile of weezing, alongside the Team Rocket Elites.

"Let's go," Misty stated bluntly.

"But we can't leave them there," Jenna insisted. "What if they run out of oxygen?"

Misty sighed, her face showing obvious discomfort at this decision. Yet she didn't deny Jenna's response was the humane one, and so the group draped Proton over Corsotaur's back, while Flair carried his companion. Then, without further interruption, the group made their way out of the smoke veil. Placing the two operatives inside a nearby rock crevice, the travellers continued deeper into the concave bowl of Mt.

Quena's internal ecosystem. The minutes seemed like hours as they traversed the dense forest, before eventually coming to the edge. Here, the ground dipped away into yet another expansive hollow - an area that Misty knew had once housed a lake of pure water that had since been relocated deeper within the mountain. In the centre of this hollow, a raised plateau of land still remained - here it was that a large helicopter could be seen, and in front of that, various pieces of unidentified mechanical equipment were erected.

"We can't get any closer than this," Kevin insisted. "There's nowhere we could possibly hide."

"That's okay," Misty said. "I came prepared." She brought out a pair of binoculars and held them up against her eyes. As the focus was adjusted, Misty picked out a large circular metal platform that had been set into the ground, surrounded by generators. A short, aged man with red-tinted glasses and receding grey-lavender hair stood at a podium, gazing out into space with a pleased smirk. Nearby, a red-haired woman in her forties was giving instructions to subordinates in lab coats. The cut of her pristine white outfit with black trim was most unlike any kind of Team Rocket uniform Misty had ever seen. "How odd," she commented. "Team Rocket members don't usually wear dresses."

"Dresses?" Jenna flinched, before reaching towards the binoculars. "Let me see." Misty handed over the item for Jenna to use. "Oh..." came the resulting tone of dawning dread.

Standing at the control podium of the impressive machine, Charon watched calmly as one of Johto's Team Rocket Executives - a woman by the name of Ariana Thenas - strode back and forth across the test site checking various things were in place. She was accompanied by a stocky, oak-brown haired man in a Super Elite uniform, who appeared far more nervous than his superior was.

"How goes the pokémon repellent procedures, Agent Tyson?" Ariana inquired, as the pair approached.

"C Rank operatives are keeping the bug types at a distance, ma'am," Tyson informed her. "But are you sure this whole thing is a wise idea?"

"We cannot afford to have any interference during these last stages of Project Rebirth," Ariana replied firmly, before turning her attentions to Charon. "Professor Baumtogh, if you will."

"Certainly," the scientist replied with a tiny smile. He tapped away at the keypad for a moment. "AntiMachinus device coming online."

Three spherical machines began to rise out of the platform on metal poles. Once they reached 30 feet in height, they began to circle the platform.

"Initiating co-ordinates," Professor Baumtogh remarked dully, typing another command into the keypad. Apertures jutted out the sides of each sphere as their circling continued to increase in speed. Then all three machines jetted a brilliant beam of red light. Instead of colliding

with one another, these beams traced out a glowing ring in mid-air. In the midst of this ring there could be seen a swirling crimson celestial mass.

"What is that?" Kevin gawped in horror.

"I don't know..." Misty replied worriedly. "But it almost looks like they've ripped a hole in the sky."

Six years ago, she would have fearlessly - almost blindly - leapt in to try and halt whatever Team Rocket were trying to achieve. But adolescence had passed, leaving caution and reality standing firmly in Misty's heart. As much as she wanted to do something, three trainers against Team Rocket's forces were not going to amount to much. All they could do for now was observe.

"We have accessed the Kratus sub-dimension," Charon announced.

"Activate the beacon," Ariana instructed. "Ready tertiary procedures."

A hatch opened in the central area of the platform, and a plinth ascended into view. In the top of the plinth there was set a multi-faceted lens with an appearance not unlike that of a butterfly's eye. The lens illuminated, and a golden light shone upwards into the suspended portal.

"Sensors are picking up a rise in inter-spacial energy," Charon relayed. "Our target is drawing closer."

"Excellent," Ariana smiled darkly. "Stay on your guard. We cannot allow it to make its entrance."

From the portal there was heard a sound that sent chills down the spines of the trio watching in secret. It was an unnatural sound which dragged its way from a low rumble into a whooping screech that echoed its way around the rocky boundaries of Mt. Quena's peak. A faint white shape could be seen within the portal now, and it was growing larger by the moment.

"Engaging tertiary procedures," Charon said calmly. A deep purple light cut through the air from the lens below, thrusting its way into the portal and engulfing the form within, causing it to utter a blood-curdling cry. Misty was forced to bite her tongue so that she wouldn't yell in protest for the mistreatment of whatever poor creature lived beyond that portal. "Five seconds remaining," the aged figure spoke. It almost seemed as if he was enjoying this part of the process. "Two...one...the target has been successfully immobilised."

"Cease access!" Ariana barked. "Do it now!"

Charon said nothing, but as he typed at the console, the three spherical machines overhead began to slow their rotation, the red beams

sputtering into nothingness. In turn, the mid-air portal shrank until it, and the contents within it, were no longer visible to those in audience.

Misty lowered her Pokédex from where she had pointed it towards the open portal in the hopes of scanning what had appeared within. It had been a very long shot and, even now, the Pokédex's extended contemplations didn't reveal much hope for further information. Just as she was about to shut the device and resign herself to the unknown, there was a bleep of acknowledgement.

"Palkia'...?" Misty read in bewilderment.

"Isn't that some kind of legendary pokémon?" Jenna pondered.

"You're right," Misty raised her eyebrows as she continued to scan the Pokédex. "Palkia is most spoken of in Sinnohan legends, and is said to have the ability to bend dimensions to its will." She paused, as the information sank in. This was obviously a massively powerful pokémon, yet Team Rocket had not attempted to harness this power in any way. In fact, all it seemed they had done was shove it into a box and sit on the lid, in a manner of speaking. "I'm surprised, but also thankful they didn't try capturing it like I feared they might," she concluded.

"I guess even Team Rocket knows when something is too hot to handle," Jenna gave a smirk.

"But they were also aware of how it could have stopped their plans," Kevin added. "Looks like a preventative measure, if I ever saw one."

"They're firing up the machine again," Jenna pointed out in shock. "What now?"

"This new portal is blue inside," Kevin pointed out. "I think they've accessed a different place."

"Does the Pokédex mention any other inter-dimensional pokémon?" Jenna asked Misty.

"A few, yes," the young woman replied. "But only one is directly connected to Palkia, and that's Dialga." She looked up anxiously. "I think that's probably the one they're aiming for now."

"To be so serious about a plan that they are disabling its biggest threats..." Jenna trailed off. "Not knowing what that plan is exactly just makes me feel even more unsettled."

"The best thing we can do at this point is get out of here, and deliver this information to others who can help," Misty said. "There's little we can do if we tackle this solo, but we might stand a chance with more people involved."

"Dialga successfully immobilised," Charon stated. "Shutting down AntiMachinus device."

The group turned around to see a cluster of butterfree hovering behind them - some of them clasping their caterpie young protectively between their stubby forepaws. It was enough to make everyone flinch in alarm at the sudden, unheard approach, but none so much as Misty whose eyes grew as round as saucers. Regardless of this, the butterfree did not appear ready to attack. One of the larger members of the group scrutinized Misty at length, before fluttering closer with its paws outstretched. Misty shrank back instinctively, trying her best not to yell out loud. This caused the butterfree to retract its approach.

"I-I'm sorry..." Misty stammered, noting the perplexed and hurt expressions of those watching her. "I'm nervous around bug types."

"That one seems awfully friendly for a wild pokémon," Jenna blinked. "Almost like it knows you."

"Fu-ree fu-ree!" the butterfree exclaimed with emphatic nods, before drifting aside to reveal a slightly smaller, yet pink-coloured member of its species. It was at this point the realisation hit. Misty's eyes welled with tears. For a moment, if but a fleeting one, she allowed the butterfree to embrace her.

"He *does* know me," the young woman concluded, wiping her face. "This butterfree used to be trained by Ash. He let him follow his own dream to raise a family after he met that pink butterfree." She smiled faintly, recalling the selflessness of a friend that seemed all but lost. Now was hardly the time to divulge such things to Ash's old pokémon

companions, however. "I guess this is where you decided to settle down, huh?"

"Fu-ree miii~" Butterfree replied, before casting a fretful glance in the direction of the barren area beyond the trees.

"Say, if you've lived here a while, maybe you might know of ways out of this place that don't involve climbing," Kevin asked hopefully. Butterfree looked thoughtful for a moment, then perked up. With a beckoning wave of one of his tiny paws, he fluttered away between the trees. Misty and the others were quick to follow, and were guided to a relatively inconspicuous gap in Mt. Quena's rocky perimeter. It was narrow, barely enough to accommodate human entrance but, with some deft manoeuvring, Misty, Jenna, Ivy and Kevin were able to make their way through. Corsotaur, Ikinis and Flair were returned to their Pokéballs and brought through the gap, before being released upon the other side. It wasn't long before Ikinis was begging to be returned to his Pokéball, having been faced with a four foot deep stream of water that ran through the passage to the outside. Ivy and Flair also resigned themselves to Pokéball transport, while Corsotaur remained in order to give Misty and her human companions something to anchor their belongings and themselves to, against the stream's current.

As the group waded steadily onward, Misty pulled out her phone from her upper jacket pocket and began to dial a number - willing for the person on the other end to pick up.

"Hello? Oak Laboratories," a warm, aged voice was heard.

"Professor Oak? This is Misty," she began. "Something really bad just happened up on Mt. Quena."

"I've been getting reports from the Johto Pokémon Institute about some serious energy disturbances," Professor Oak agreed.

"It's Team Rocket's doing," Misty explained. "They've been on top of the mountain, tearing portals into other dimensions and sealing the pokémon within them."

"What?" Professor Oak spluttered, taken by surprise at this sudden inrush of information. "You've *seen* this? Just what have you been up to?" His voice was now a mixture of anger and worry.

"Look, you can scold me about it later," Misty frowned, quietly thankful that Professor Oak's hearing wasn't strong enough to have detected the sounds of the gushing stream around her. "Team Rocket's up to no good, and I fear it's worse than anything they've attempted before."

"I fear you're right, Misty," Professor Oak replied, sounding a little more composed. "The Guardsmen Monitoring Agency is certain Team Rocket were siphoning considerable resources from the Aura Network a little over a week ago."

"The Aura Network? What's that?" Misty blinked.

"It is the very life force that runs through our planet," Professor Oak explained. "It keeps plants nourished, water flowing and dimensions stable. Some cultures have referred to it as the 'Dragon Force' because of its importance in biological cycles."

"And Team Rocket decided to abuse it," Misty grit her teeth. "Sounds about right."

"But for what purpose...this is what concerns me," Professor Oak sighed. "The Pokémon Institute is on alert, and the Guardsmen are currently negotiating ways to deal with Team Rocket - still, without proper knowledge of their intentions, this is all extremely challenging."

"Yes...it is," Misty nodded.

"I don't feel comfortable with you being out there during such a volatile time," Professor Oak murmured. "It's bad enough Ash is missing, but to have you put at risk..."

"I'm trying to *find* Ash, Professor," Misty insisted. "Trust me...please?"

A heavy breath of resignation was heard on the end of the PokéGear.

"You're old enough to make your own decisions, Misty," he said at last. "Be careful."

"I will," the young woman smiled sadly. "Thank you."

~**~~**~***~**~***~**~***

"Shortly after we got out of Mt. Quena, Kev and I figured it best to come back to Tatto and make sure you guys were okay," Jenna concluded. "Pool our knowledge, that sort of thing."

"So let's get to pooling," Kevin boomed. "What's happened to all of you since we last saw ya?"

Everyone glanced at one another, then descended into awkward chuckling.

"I think a better question might be 'what *hasn't* happened?'," Denise scratched the back of her head.

"Without getting into too much detail, we've been retrieving the pokémon hybrids that Team Rocket created and looking for their new headquarters," Rose explained.

"And cramming in a spot of training on the side," James grinned.

"From what I've gathered from my tracking device, Team Rocket has relocated to the south-west area of Tatto," Mondo joined in. "Though the location in the exact south-west is a small coastal village - I don't see that being where they've set up HQ. That would be too obvious, especially now they don't have the facilities to psychically mislead people any more."

"We're going to visit Darkiff City next," Caley said. "Once we find the new headquarters, we'll be in a better position to know what to do after that. What about you two? Are you going to travel with us now?"

All eyes were on Kevin, Jenna and their pokémon now - hopeful and expectant.

"As cool as it'd be to do that, the best thing we can do for you guys is to keep an eye on how everyone else reacts to what's happening," Kevin spoke at last.

"And try our best to prevent any retaliation plans reaching Team Rocket," Jenna nodded.

"We understand," Errol smiled. "It sure was nice gettin' a spot of time ta catch up wit'cha."

"Hey, we'll be back," Kevin grinned. "Don't you worry about that!"

"It'll be difficult to respond at all when we still don't know what the threat is, so here's my 'gear number," Jenna said, handing over a scrap of paper. "Try and get in contact with us when you feel it's safe to."

With that final word, the duo bid a cheerful farewell to their companions, turned and wandered back into the trees with their pokémon following close behind.

"Dialga and Palkia..." James breathed. He could understand Team Rocket's wariness over the interference of such pokémon. Their clash

over Alamos Town in Sinnoh had managed to pull the town into another dimension entirely, and it had been said that Team Galactic's attempts to manipulate their powers had almost caused an unstable chain reaction. Indeed they were not creatures to be dealt with lightly.

"First hybrid pokémon experiments, then an energy-siphoning obelisk, now sealing legends away in other dimensions," Denise listed thoughtfully. "How are all these things connected? What is the binding motive?"

"And was toinin' Jimmy into a pokémon any part of it?" Errol rubbed his chin.

"Sounds like a load of random stuff to me," Adam pulled a face. "Maybe the boss of Team Rocket finally lost his mind."

"No..." Rose shook her head. "These are all pieces of Project Rebirth. We just haven't managed to arrange them in the right way yet."

"And we're running out of time to do so," Caley reminded them morosely. "Now everyone is awake, we need to leave for Darkiff City."

"But what about breakfast?" James looked upset.

"We'll grab something to eat on our way out," Caley said. "I'm sorry, James. We can't afford to stay here any longer."

"Eatin' on da move," Errol shrugged, as the group made their way out of the grassy area. "I can dig it. Let's go Cory, Psyduck."

first, Darius had lied to himself to lessen the impact of his ensnarement by Team Rocket, shortly after signing into an electronics company that they were covertly running. He'd said what Team Rocket had been up to wasn't that bad. Sure, some people had lost money, but the schemes were relatively harmless. Yet, the higher he had travelled up the rank ladder, the more Darius had been forced to deceive himself about what he saw happening around him. In the end, the boundaries between his morals and his lies became horribly smeared.

But Janice had never been like that. She had seen everything for the raw brutality it was, and she had refused to convince herself otherwise. Darius had told his wife enough times not to try and leave. He had emphasized the terrible consequences, should she be caught. Janice had ignored his warnings, they had found her attempting to escape with Adam, and as punishment, she fell victim to the untamed whims of Executive Eris' Personality Reprogramming machine. Darius had never wanted it to end that way, but Janice had brought it upon herself.

Yet there was a part of his ailing conscience that remained unconvinced. *Why didn't you stop it from happening?* it would demand. Today it seemed particularly fervent. He tried to drown it out again.

"It would have been futile." he mumbled.

You could have changed her fate, it insisted, louder. *You weren't strong enough to protest, were you?*

"She brought it upon herself!" Darius bellowed into the empty room, then fell silent. *Why didn't you listen to me?* he thought bitterly. *Why did you try to run away?*

The shrill ringing of Darius' office phone cut into his thoughts from its place on the desk. He flinched wildly, before snatching the handset from the phone and holding it up to his head.

"Darius, sir?" a woman's hesitant voice was heard on the other end. "This is Cassidy."

"What is it now?" Darius snapped, hardly in the mood to be engaging in conversation. "Haven't you caught those traitors yet?"

"Well no, not yet, sir..." Cassidy replied guiltily. "They have been very hard to find because they've been in disguise. But we finally uncovered what their disguises look like!"

"And you documented this, I hope?"

There was a long pause.

"I'm afraid it was very dark, sir," Cassidy trailed off, realising this sounded like a rather pathetic excuse. She didn't even wish to go into detail over the 'blasting off' which had made the memories of the travellers' disguises rather fuzzy in her own mind. Darius sighed heavily from the other end of the phone.

"Listen, Agent Sampson," he began with thinly-veiled frustration. "Project Rebirth has advanced significantly since you and your team-

mates began your mission to recapture the escaped pokémon specimens. It would be an...unnecessary use of resources to continue. Therefore, I shall be relieving you three of this duty."

"What?" Cassidy spluttered.

"I will be transferring you the coordinates of Team Rocket's relocated headquarters in Tatto," Darius continued. "Return here in the next 24 hours, and you will be given updated assignments."

The line went dead. Jessie glanced up as Cassidy slowly lowered her communicator.

"So...?" she urged.

"We're off the mission," Cassidy said dully. "Admin Darius wants us to go to the new Tatto HQ for further instruction."

"Eh, it's probably a good thing," Jessie shrugged. "Any longer and your partner there will have cleared out our medicine supply."

Cassidy looked over at Butch, who had been hunched inside the cab of their vehicle, shaking violently. Over the past few hours his irritated grumbling had dissipated into silence, which was indeed never a good sign from a person who was unwell. Recall or not, Butch wouldn't have made it much farther without proper medical treatment.

"Right," she said, handing the communicator to Jessie. "While I don't want to give you such a heavy responsibility, Butch is hardly in any

proved unperturbed by this temperamental weather, and continued eating grass despite the downpours. As they travelled higher into the peaks, scaling precarious roads with little boundary to stop them plummeting into the valley below, the water vapour shifted in the surrounding air like a thin curtain tossed by a breeze. With the bus practically empty of all but themselves, Caley, Adam, Denise, James, Rose, Errol, Mondo and Cory were free to gaze with awe upon everything their senses could take in.

The bus pulled into the city station, just a short walk from Darkiff Port - an average-sized marina which catered for local goods and boat trips. Onshore merchants discovered long ago that this area of the prosperous settlement bore much potential when trading and selling goods, and as a result the port had generated quite a bustling vendor community. Even now, the atmosphere seemed to vibrate with the cheerful thrum of the market's activity. Rose and Denise couldn't help being drawn to this hub of bargains and curios.

For a few minutes, the travellers were blissfully distracted with everyday life. Adam purchased an ice cream from a van selling frozen treats nearby, only to beget fervent protest from James and Errol who were partial to a spot of dessert themselves. Once they too had been satisfied, the figures returned to where Rose and Denise happened to be browsing. James peered over Rose's shoulder, pointing out certain items and making various 'Oooo!' and 'Ahhh..' noises as he did so. Rose tried her best to make sure James didn't drip his ice lolly all over the items on

sale. It wasn't long before she came across something which piqued her interest.

"Well look at that," Rose smiled, picking up a book from one of the stalls. "A Pokémon Fortune Telling manual."

"Fortune telling?" James squeaked nervously.

"Yup. The latest edition complete with new pokémon comparison chart." the vendor smiled. "Basically, you look up your date of birth and it tells you what pokémon you are most similar to."

"What's wrong James?" Rose asked with a puzzled glance at her friend's paled features.

"He's had...bad experiences wit' dose books," Errol lent an explanation as he approached.

"What sort of bad experiences could you get from a book?" Adam raised an eyebrow.

"Plenty," James muttered, recalling the exhibitionist attitude he'd developed shortly after reading a phoney fortune book that Butch and Cassidy had been selling in Johto. Errol suddenly became very interested.

"Hey...I've always wondered what made ya so upset when you looked at da real t'ing," he said. "Pass it here, Rose." James made a lunge for the book but Errol already had it in his grasp and was intent on keeping it that way. "Lessee...birth date..." As Errol turned to the particular page, his eyes widened slightly.

"What?" the others piped up.

"Please..." James' voice was getting quieter but more desperate at this point, as Rose sidled over to see what made Errol react that way. Denise stood on her tiptoes and peered in between the stunned readers, and she raised her eyebrows.

"A probopass?"

"James is a probopass type?" Rose repeated in disbelief. Caley looked on with an expression that confirmed his complete lack of understanding of the whole thing.

"I don't get it..." Errol trailed off as James put on a pout of annoyance and misery. "What's so awful about dat?"

"Think about it," James grumbled. "Being compared to a big rock with a serious case of nosehair isn't exactly the most flattering description."

"James, it's not talking about *physical* appearances," Denise piped up. "It means you're highly sturdy...dependable...with a firm grasp on your own direction - just like how a probopass is drawn towards facing north."

At this statement James moved closer for another look. After a minute or so he stepped back and scratched his head thoughtfully.

"I guess that's not so bad," he murmured.

"Besides, if we were going by appearances, it'd have a picture of a sudowoodo in there instead," Adam snorted. "Or a mistermime."

"Adam..." came the dangerously volatile voices of the remaining group members. "Don't push your luck."

Adam quickly lost interest in the exploits of the group and returned to see what Caley and Mondo were doing. They had been standing nearby while Psyduck napped against a concrete post and Cory-in-human-form happily chased the wingulls. Mondo pored over his scanner device with a furrowed brow.

"What's up?" Adam inquired, trying to get a look.

"I'm picking up a ton of communication signals now," Mondo said. "It should be easy to tell where the HQ is at this point! But..." he continued to stare at the screen, where a bright green dot continued to blink mockingly at him. "The source keeps showing up in the ocean. There's no way they could have kept flying in that area for that long, and to have built a boat or some kind of floating location in barely more than a week could never have happened."

"Maybe your scanner thing's got issues," Adam remarked.

"Maybe.." Mondo trailed off and looked disappointed.

"Or maybe we just need to do a bit more research as to what is out there in Tatto's southern ocean," Caley suggested. "Since the guidebook didn't give us any ideas."

"Research...blech," Adam pulled a face.

"Well we're not going to get a clue about where to look next if we don't," Caley eyed him. He could no longer sense the hostility and betrayal from Adam that had surfaced after Caley's confession over his abilities, and this was reassuring in itself. However the distantness still remained, and this saddened him, even though Caley knew such boundaries were not his fault. "But who to ask?"

"Oh I dunno," Adam began, a little sarcastically. "How about the people who sail boats out in the ocean every day?"

"Snarkiness aside, that's actually a good idea," Mondo nodded. "I'm gonna head down to the docks."

"I'll come with you," Caley spoke up. "Adam, could you stay with Cory and Psyduck until we get back?"

"Sure, works for me," Adam grunted. "Better to stay here than over there with the Blue-Haired Moron Fan Club." Caley sensed a spike of envy from the youth at this point, and it caused him to jolt slightly. Mondo's expression dictated he wasn't at all happy with Adam's opinion of his old associate, but he said nothing and instead left Adam to his own devices.

"I've checked everything over," Karis replied from the other side of the boat. "We're good to go."

"Um...excuse me?" a voice was heard nearby. Farrell looked round to see Mondo and Caley standing at the dock's edge, giving the boat a thorough visual examination. "I was doing a spot of research into Darkiff Port and wondered if you could answer a question of mine," Mondo continued.

"We could try," Farrell smiled. "Shoot."

"Are there any landmarks in the ocean near here?" Mondo asked. "Stuff like unusual rock formations, small islands..."

"Oh, nothing like that," Farrell shook his head. "The only things out there are a wind farm, and an oil platform that has been abandoned ever since the wind farm was erected."

"Really..." Mondo trailed off, processing this new information.

"Not all that fancy from a sightseer point of view," Karis joined in, standing up from where she had been checking the sailing equipment. "But could be of interest to trainers, what with the various kinds of pokémon that have reclaimed the place over the years."

"My sister and I happened to be going out there ourselves today," Farrell told them. "If you like, you're welcome to join us and Mr. Recon here."

He waved his hand toward the stern of the boat where a man in his late fifties was sitting. He was dressed in a dark overcoat with a rather eccentric hat covering the majority of his cinnamon brown hair. It was an odd, bulbous piece of headgear in dull shades of blue, red and green, which gave it the appearance of a dirty coloured beach ball, and almost looked as old as the wearer. Upon his shoulder there sat a pikachu with ruffled fur between its ears. The man had been looking relatively calm, up until hearing Farrell's last sentence, at which point he had grown a little fidgety, his eyes focused on the back of Farrell's head, almost as if he was willing his associate to retract his offer.

"That sounds great," Caley smiled. "Count me in."

"Fantastic!" Farrell replied cheerfully, patting the hull as the boat's engine rumbled into life. "Well hop in, then. We're just about to leave."

"But Caley, what about the others?" Mondo asked him worriedly. "They don't know where we are."

"Go fetch them, and catch up with me," Caley insisted in lowered tones, quickly rummaging about in his bag. "I can't let this opportunity slip." He brought out Larydos' Pokéball and placed it firmly into Mondo's hand, followed by Kota's Pokéball. Then, without another word, Caley clambered over the side of the boat and Karis turned it gently to face the open water. "See you in a bit!" Caley called.

Mondo watched, slightly aghast, as the boat drifted steadily into the southern ocean and out of view. He knew why Caley had leapt at the

chance - this oil rig sounded like a prime point of operations, after all. But even so, the young man's spontaneity had been alarmingly abrupt. He gazed down at the Ultra and Luxury balls in his hands and wondered just whom Caley had loaned him. Still, there was no time for hesitation - he needed to regroup his companions fast!

Sorry Kota, Caley thought. But if they don't have your help, they'll never be able to track me down.

The man had stopped fidgeting and now appeared to be sulking. Caley couldn't help but wonder what his interest in an abandoned oil rig happened to be.

"Cup of tea, Mr. Recon?" Farrell waved a flask. The man shook his head.

"Don't suppose you've got any soda?" he grunted.

"Hm, let me see," Farrell sorted through the case. "There's a can of Sitruzade in here...though it's kind of warm."

"Let Humbug sort that out for you," Karis said, glancing at the swinub sitting nearby. "Humbug, be a sweetie and chill that drink, would you?" The swinub responded by letting out a short blast of icy breath over the can, covering it in a light, frosty sheen. Farrell then handed it to Recon, whose expression brightened. With that, Karis turned her attention to the youngest occupant of the boat. "So, what's your name?"

"I'm Caley Wilson," he replied.

"Caley Wilson?" Farrell blinked. "You're Jack Wilson's kid, aren't you?"

"Yeah..." Caley eyed him.

"Who's Jack Wilson?" Recon inquired.

"The Pokémon League called him one of the best psychic-type Gym Leaders in the world," Farrell said. "Strong, justice-seeking, ambitious..." He chuckled slightly. "Seems like you're a chip off the old block, Caley."

More than I'd like to admit, Caley thought to himself.

"How long have you been a Pokémon Trainer?" Karis asked.

"'Pokémon Trainer' is a bit of a strong term to be used on me," Caley smiled uncomfortably. "But I've been travelling together with pokémon for a couple of weeks now...I think. It's hard to tell with everything that's happened."

"I can relate to that," Recon groaned slightly. "There are far more things I'd love to be doing right now than detective work, believe me..." He took a gulp of Sitruzade from the can in his hand and swallowed. "Oh well. The sooner I find what I'm looking for, the sooner things can get back to normal."

"Detective work?" Caley echoed. Recon flinched as Karis and Farrell also glanced at him in surprise.

"Di-did I say that?" he stammered, as the pikachu on his shoulder slapped its own forehead. "It's a figure of speech, isn't it? Scouting an area, learning its mysteries..."

"Are you a spy?" Karis tilted her head a little. Neither her nor Farrell seemed angry at this sudden discovery, just puzzled. Recon glanced at his pikachu, as if for some kind of guidance, to which the electric rodent shrugged.

"I'm working with the International Police," Recon admitted at last. He brought out an ID card and flashed it to his audience. "Guardsmen data sources have pointed me in the direction of the Tattoan southern ocean. We have reason to believe that Team Rocket moved their operations there, after being driven out of Dusty Town."

"That's it!" Caley exclaimed. "That's the sign I've been looking for."

"What?" Recon looked alarmed.

"I've been searching for Team Rocket ever since they left Dusty Town," Caley told them. "I have to enter that HQ, I have to see what they're planning!"

"Why is visiting Team Rocket's headquarters so important to *you*?" Farrell asked with a slight frown.

"It's a very complicated story," Caley said. "But to summarize it, the end product of their plan has a lot to do with what actions I must take next."

"It's great that you want to see them taken down," Recon insisted. "But Team Rocket are dangerous people. Trust me, I know. I've had to deal with them more than once."

"I am aware of how dangerous Team Rocket is, sir," Caley replied as politely as he could manage. "And this has nothing to do with me trying to play the hero. In fact, I'd love nothing more than to let other people solve these problems instead of me. But I am directly involved in this."

"Directly involved...?" Recon murmured under his breath. He pulled out a handheld computer and set about accessing the Guardsmen citizen database. As his finger hovered over the entry for Caley's profile, the computer screen's image jolted ever so slightly. Then again, more fervently. Caley winced and placed a hand to the side of his head, as a bluish haze materialized a short distance away from the boat. Very soon the haze had completely surrounded Farrell, Karis and their passengers - obscuring the surrounding environment from view.

Before anyone could make further comment, a harsh screech was heard from the deeper parts of the haze. The massive shadowed form of a winged figure could be seen hovering amongst its surroundings.

"What is that?" Farrell squinted. "Some kind of pokémon?"

"If it is, I couldn't tell you," Recon frowned. "Something's giving off a wave that's seriously messing with my computer."

Seriously messing with my head, too... Caley grimaced, trying to keep his face turned away from the others in the boat. *My Pokédex isn't going to be much use either, if Recon's equipment isn't working.* He glanced toward the shadowed figure in the distance, trying to make out notable features. It was bird-like in appearance, with a long, flowing mane and two large clawed flippers that appeared to count as its wings.

"Sort of looks like a Lugia-" Karis' sentence descended into a scream as a massive plume of flame tore through the blue haze, searing the top of the boat. The figure had drawn closer now, its tremendous red visage looming over the stricken vessel and its passengers. Ice blue eyes stared down judgementally, as if prying open the hidden motives of everyone present.

Go back.. a voice reverberated in Caley's psyche. *Leave now, before you have no choice.*

TO BE CONTINUED...

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